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Fowler, John Henry

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English Literature in Secondary Schools

By

John Henry
J. H. Fowler, M.A.

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ENGLISH LITERATURE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS ¹

THE present moment—with its inauguration under happy auspices of an association for the study of the English language and literature, with its awakening, as is indicated by an unprecedented number of reprints of the English classics, of a widespread interest in these things among the masses of our countrymen, with its awakening also of a new consciousness among the scattered members of the English family all over the world of the bonds that draw them together—the present moment, I say, seems to mark the second opportunity presented to our English schools for repairing their long neglect of our national literature. The first opportunity was given about thirty-eight years ago, when, concurrently with the establishment of elementary education upon a national basis, there was a great revival of secondary schools going on throughout the country, whilst the attacks made on the traditional classical curriculum of the older schools were resulting in the widening of that curriculum, and in the institution of modern sides. If the second opportunity presented to us now is neither to be missed nor misused, it is important to understand why so little came of the first.

I think we may sum up the causes of failure as follows. (1) Those to whom it fell to give teaching in English were without guidance as to the methods most appropriate to the subject. The great schools, no doubt, in many cases—and the smaller schools in some cases also—were fortunate enough to possess one or two men whose keen interest and high attainment in this subject, combined with vigorous individuality, rendered them independent of assistance, and enabled them to strike out methods for themselves, and to give lessons of an inspiring quality that their successors may well admire and imitate, but cannot hope to excel. But the average teacher, it will be admitted, was prone to fall back upon the methods of the classical curriculum in which he had been trained, or to look for guidance to the annotated edition that was given him to use, or to the examination by which his teaching was tested.

¹ A paper read before the members of the English Association at the Second Annual General Meeting, January 11, 1908.

(2) The annotated editions of English classics were themselves modelled upon classical commentaries, and directed attention to linguistic, archaeological, historical, or geographical points, whilst neglecting, as a rule, the consideration of the author's style and method, his aim and achievement. This concentration upon the letter of the text, to the neglect of what is far more essential and far more truly educative—the study of the author's meaning, the realization of the man and his audience—has not been a defect of our teaching of English literature alone. It has been the worst defect of a large part of classical teaching too. Indeed I sometimes think that the antagonism which too often exists between the supporters of a classical training and the advocates of English study would disappear if both the one side and the other cared less for the language and more for the vital elements of literature, that sanity of true genius, that seeing of life steadily and seeing it whole, which is after all the main reason for the enduring importance alike of Sophocles and of Shakespeare.

(3) I think that our distinguished chairman, whose own practice and example have done so much to fix the attention of all of us upon these more vital elements of literature, will forgive me if I find another cause of failure in the tendency of the first professors of English literature, when it was at last admitted to the rank of a University subject, to emphasize the study of the historical origins of our language and the Anglo-Saxon sources of our older literature. No true scholar would wish to depreciate the value of those two studies, or to minimize the debt that we owe to the men who have given up their lives to the furtherance of them. Yet it cannot be said that their methods, which have so largely determined the type of examination-paper common during the last forty years, point out the best path by which the average Englishman may attain to such an understanding and love of his national literature as is to be desired for him. Indeed, if we cannot come to the literature straight, it is better to approach it by the old road of the classics. It is far more vital to have some knowledge of the great world-stream of literature, of Homer and Virgil, as a preparation for the understanding of the best English classics than to be learned in early and middle English.

(4) Lastly, the English examination-system, with its baneful tendency to set the highest value upon results that can most easily be assessed in marks, has injuriously influenced the teaching of English literature as of other things.

I have no wish to exaggerate what I have called the failure of our teaching in this subject. I think there is some exaggeration in

current criticism; that outside critics of the public schools in particular, like Sir Oliver Lodge, have very little idea of the splendid quality of much of the English teaching given there. The lack of intellectual interest, with which they so freely charge us, is mainly due, I imagine, neither to masters nor methods nor subjects, but (I should not venture to say it if it had not been said by better men before me) to the deep-seated Philistinism of the English nation, of the upper classes as much as of the lower, to the anti-intellectual influence of the homes from which our boys come, and the anti-intellectual tradition that is stronger than the influence of any master. Yet I freely confess that the hopeful signs which I have already mentioned as marking the present moment, are not due to anything that the schools have done for English literature. If I ask myself what has kept the love of literature alive in the nation during the last forty years, I am constrained to answer: Not, in any great degree, the schools. I should assign the main part of the credit to the direct influence of the great Victorian writers, Carlyle and Ruskin especially, upon their readers; a part to the missionary work of the professors of English literature in our universities and provincial colleges, and to university extension lecturers; a part to the influence of the best kinds of journalism; a part to the enlightened enterprise of the publishers and editors to whom we owe reprints like 'The Temple Classics'; and perhaps the least part of all to the schools.

Well, once again the opportunity is presented to us; and our presence here to-day is a token that we are anxious to make the best use of it. I do not think we shall fall into precisely the mistakes that were fallen into before. For one thing, the tyranny of the annotated edition is greatly less than it was. Moreover, in the annotated editions themselves and in other printed aids to the teaching of English literature there is far greater choice available than there was even a few years ago; and if the newer editions too often fall below the old in solidity of learning, they show, on the whole, greater appreciation of the needs of the beginner. Again, if we have not escaped from the tyranny of examinations, the requirements of the chief examining bodies in England, and the types of paper set by them, have undergone very sensible modification in the right direction during the last few years. Whilst, therefore, I have thought the old dangers still so far real that it seemed worth while to recall them to you to-day, I incline to think there are other dangers, some of them born of a natural reaction against the old, against which it is even more necessary to be on our guard.

First among these I would place the danger of substituting for

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the old-fashioned study of a too restricted number of books read at a painfully slow pace a mere hazy impression of the history of literature. Some of those who write on the teaching of this subject, or provide books for the teaching of it, have little idea what an empty thing a generalization is to the mind of a child of fourteen, or even of sixteen or seventeen. I was glad to see in that excellent list of books for a Teachers' Reference Library recently issued by our Association the salutary caution appended to its recommendation of Mr. Stopford Brooke's admirable Primer, that it was sometimes put into the hands of children not mature enough to use it. But some of the most recent histories of literature produced for school consumption are very much less suited than his Primer for the school-room. Some of them contain generalizations that are not only empty of meaning to the child but somewhat empty of meaning to the adult reader also. Except, possibly, for the very highest forms of a secondary school, the history of literature is not a good subject for schools at all. By all means let us set the authors to whom we introduce our pupils in their proper historical surroundings: we cannot give a true idea of the man and his work without giving also some idea of the age in which he lived, the age that made him or that he helped to make. But I am convinced that we shall err if, instead of teaching literature, we try to teach the history of literature, with or without the help of elegant extracts, which, to use an old simile, are like bricks offered as specimens of houses.

Akin to this first danger, which I call the danger of *impressionism*, is another that I may name the danger of *sentimentalism*. From two points of view I see a danger here. First, much of the literature of the present day is without that reticence which is so impressive a characteristic of the best literature, and there is a real danger that some of us whose love for our subject is quite unaffected may gush about it unwisely. There is no surer way to weary the average class with literature than to tell them too often to 'mark the pathos'. Let the self-restraint of the great writers be an example to us here. And let us remember only as an awful warning that answer of the popular novelist who accounted for her success by saying, 'I press my soul out upon the white paper.' That operation is a degree worse than to wear the heart upon the sleeve; and one can hardly help the reflection that it must be a pulpy and squashy-sort of soul that can be so treated.

But perhaps the more serious peril is that this sentimentalism, without taking the form of positive gush—nay, even whilst protesting to itself that it abhors gush above all things—may induce a revolt

against anything like a high standard of accurate and scientific scholarship. I know that there are some lovers of English literature so firmly convinced that anything that is taught in school must be hateful to the pupil that they beg us, for the sake of literature, not to make it a school subject. I do not share their fears. In an experience of teaching of more than twenty years I cannot recall a single case of a distaste for English literature that could fairly be set down to the reaction from school studies. Happily I do know, on the contrary, of many cases where the lesson in English literature has laid the foundation of an enduring pleasure. But many of us have grown terribly afraid of words like 'analysis' and 'paraphrase' because the processes they stand for have been wofully misused in the past. We need to be reminded, I think, that if our study is to justify itself we must prosecute it in a scientific spirit—using it, as it may so well be used, to teach the process of definition, which, as Socrates pointed out so long ago, is the basis of sound knowledge, to teach the value of clear thinking, the hatefulness of a slipshod and confused terminology.

The teacher who sets before himself this ideal will not be moved by an outcry that he is making literature hateful by making it a really intellectual exercise. There will always be pupils to whom anything of the nature of intellectual discipline is irksome. The artistic temperament, in particular (which is capable of deriving the intensest enjoyment from literature, and which, therefore, the teacher must try not to alienate), will be naturally averse to restraint. This reflection may go some way to console the schoolmaster for the scant respect which the genius that cannot be defined as 'a capacity for taking pains' sometimes shows to his labours. You remember how Byron writes in *Childe Harold* of 'Horace that I hated so', and finds the cause of his hatred in the dullness of the Harrow pedagogues. But Byron's readers may well reflect that some of the finest passages in *Childe Harold*, those that express so eloquently the impressiveness of Greece and Rome, owe more than their author knew to those despised lessons; and may reflect further that, if he had been a more tractable pupil, we might have been able to pay his English style a finer compliment than the strange one paid him by Sir Walter—'that he wielded his pen with the negligent ease of a person of quality.'

By way of showing that analytic study need not be fatal to artistic appreciation, I think it may be worth while to mention what I have seen done at Clifton during the last few years with the study of music. To interest the average schoolboy in musical analysis is surely not an

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easier thing than to interest him in the analysis of literary forms. Yet I have seen, again and again, an audience of nearly 200 boys voluntarily assembled in their playtime to listen to an analytic lecture on music delivered by way of preparation for an orchestral concert, with the result that, when the concert was eventually given, a large number of boys have followed difficult symphonies with evident and enthusiastic appreciation.

A third danger—not a new one, but liable to be increased, if we do not take care, by the very emphasis that we lay on our own subject—is the danger of *isolation*. I almost shrink from using the word ‘correlation’: it has been so liberally employed of late in educational matters. From the top of a Bristol tramcar the other day I observed in a pork-butcher’s window the legend—‘Sausages, best quality, 7d.; digestive, 6d.’ Well, I am a little afraid that ‘correlation’ in educational matters may have attached to it the significance which the pork-butcher evidently attached to the word ‘digestive’—that it may become a symbol for that which is not of the best quality, for a mixture of doubtful ingredients. But I venture to think that the teaching of English, and even of English literature, will never prosper in schools if it is treated too much as a thing apart and made the concern of specialists. Some of the best possible lessons in English literature are those that are given almost or quite casually in the course of a lesson in a classical or foreign author by the reading of a parallel passage. That principle of the unity of literature, of which I have already spoken, applies here. Again, the teaching of English composition should be brought into close relation with the teaching of literature. Few more stimulating subjects for school-essays in the higher forms can be found than a suggested comparison between the modes of treatment employed by two authors in dealing with a similar topic or situation. Once more, I should like to remind those who teach history of the extent to which they can help or hinder the object we have at heart. Is sufficient care being exercised that the text-books of history used in schools are written in pure, idiomatic, dignified English? I fancy there has been some falling-off in this respect of late years, and I have noted with dismay that at least one able and much-commended ‘Introduction to English History’ seeks to conciliate the schoolboy by frankly adopting his own slang. Let us remember that the reading of a history-book is inevitably a lesson in style: the book is read slowly, and its phrases attach themselves to the memory. I think we scarcely make enough use in school, whether for history or literature, of the great historians—Gibbon, Macaulay, Napier, Prescott, Motley, Arnold, and the rest. Even when they are

not placed in the hands of pupils, the great scenes and passages from them might with advantage be more frequently read aloud by the teacher.

The last danger I can touch upon is what, for want of a better word, I may be allowed to call *materialism*. In some quarters the cry for more teaching of the mother-tongue is accompanied by a disposition to disparage the higher uses of literature. Professor Armstrong, for example, with whose advocacy of English teaching on the ground of its supreme utility I cordially sympathize, appears to regard the literary teacher, whose interest lies in the humaner qualities of his subject, as not merely unpractical, but unmanly. I hope that while we claim for the study of English that it is the best possible preparation for the study of the sciences and for the needs of practical life, we shall refuse to admit that there is anything unpractical or unmanly in valuing literature most for its power to enlighten and to uplift. 'Man shall not live by bread alone,' and the needs of the spirit are not less urgent than the needs of the body. Remembering with Wordsworth that 'poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge'—believing with Shelley that 'the great instrument of moral good is the imagination, and poetry administers to the effect by acting on the cause'—we shall be content in our teaching with no aim short of the highest.

I have spoken of failures in the past and of dangers in the present, but I trust I have made it clear that I do not think the difficulties to be encountered insuperable; that, on the contrary, I am full of faith for the possibilities of the subject. If I have dealt with general principles rather than with details, I hope you will not feel this is merely beating the air. For I venture to think that these principles lie very close to our practice, and that what we need for success is not so much rules of method and outlines of courses, valuable as these are, but teachers who combine with adequate knowledge and the student's reverence for sound learning the saving graces of common sense, humour, and sympathy, a clear vision of their aim, the feeling that literature is a help to them in their own lives, and the earnest desire that it should be a help to the lives of others.

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Price 6*d.* (to Associate Members, 1*s.*)

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Author Fowler, John Henry

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